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Soviet Navy Outflanks U.S. In Mine Warfare

Mines are an effective and relatively cheap means of sealing off an enemy's seaports in time of war. But the Soviet Navy has opened up an impressive "gap" in this bargain-basement area of naval competition with the United States.

According to a recent study by the General Accounting Office, based on reports by the Naval Intelligence Support Center and other agencies, the Soviet Union "has the largest, most diversified mine stockpile and mine warfare force of any of the world's navies."

Meanwhile, the government probers concluded, the U.S. Navy's mine laying and mine sweeping capabilities have reached an all-time low. Exacerbating the problem is the fact that the Navy has given low priority to intelligence efforts to determine the extent of the Russians' mine warfare expertise.

While shrugging off the Soviet potential, the Pentagon admirals have let their own mine warfare strength go to pot, concluded the investigators.

"The Navy would find it hard to conduct even the most limited type of mining or mine countermeasures

operations," the secret GAO report states. "The force is degraded by [an] inadequate number of ships, their age and deteriorating condition, and lack of experienced mine countermeasures personnel."

While U.S. intelligence agencies agree about the Russians' superiority in mine warfare, there is disagreement over the Soviets' intentions, and thus over the seriousness of the threat opened up by the "mine gap." And because gathering intelligence about Soviet mine warfare advances has been given such a low priority, sources told my associate Lucette Lagnado, there is really little authoritative information on the subject.

All of this brought the U.S. overseers back to the sorry state of preparedness they found in the Navy's mine laying and mine sweeping capability.

"A severe lack of mine warfare tactical expertise plagues the naval fleet and major shore staffs," the unpublished GAO report states. Several Navy officials acknowledged to the congressional investigators that many officers assigned to mining or mine-sweeping units had had no experience in the tricky business.

More than that, the Navy's mine sweepers are sorry specimens. The basic force includes 25 ships with an average age of 25 years. And the vessels are not only antiques, but in deplorable condition.

Basking in the billions of dollars showered on them by the Reagan

administration, the Pentagon's admirals apparently are planning to throw a few bucks toward the mine warfare program. Several new projects are on the drawing board; some are even in the production stage. Unfortunately, the report predicts, it will take the Navy time to accomplish its mine warfare goals — perhaps as long as five years.